

LOCAL

Waterfront Warwick neighborhoods are full of 'No Parking' signs. Many aren't legal.

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Try to get to the water in Warwick's desirable Potowomut neighborhood, and you'll quickly find that virtually every street is lined with "No Parking" signs.

But on many of those streets, parking isn't actually banned by the city.

Warwick is littered with hundreds of "illegal or illegitimate" parking signs, mainly in waterfront areas, according to Aaron Mackisey, an aide to Mayor Frank Picozzi. Some were put up by the city decades ago, at residents' request, but have no legal power because there are no ordinances in place to back them up.

In other cases, "you've had some residents make their own parking signs," Mackisey said. "They used to buy them up at Benny's and just throw them up in a tree."

The days of DIY parking restrictions are now coming to an end: Warwick plans to remove many of the unofficial or unenforceable "No Parking" signs. Some will remain, but only if police have conducted a traffic study and determined that a parking ban is warranted and the City Council agrees.

Part of the goal is to ensure that Warwick is "fulfilling our obligation to provide access to the coastline," says councilman Vinny Gebhart, whose ward includes Potowomut.

"No Parking" signs also cause headaches for residents

Throughout Rhode Island, neighborhoods with public right-of-ways leading to the ocean also tend to have a high concentration of "No Parking" signs. Residents cite the need to ensure that there's enough room for fire trucks or ambulances to pass through, while

activists say that the restrictions are an exclusionary tactic designed to prevent outsiders from getting to the beach.

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Opening up parking on some streets in Warwick's waterfront neighborhoods — even if it was technically legal all along — has the potential to be contentious.

"If you're someone who's lived here for 50 years, and you've had a 'No Parking' sign by your house for 50 years, removing that could cause some heartburn," Gebhart acknowledges.

But Gebhart, who worked with the mayor's office and Police Department to review restrictions in Potowomut, says neighborhood residents were also getting frustrated with the abundance of "No Parking" signs.

Periodically, residents would call his office to say that their guests had parked on the street and gotten a ticket. Enforcement was sporadic, with police typically issuing tickets only when a neighbor called to complain about parked cars.

Those tickets would ultimately get thrown out in court, but "that felt like a waste of everyone's time," Gebhart said.

"The neighborhood perspective was that we're not trying to keep anyone out, and we don't need this exclusive parking situation," he added. "And really, for us it causes issues."

Unsanctioned parking signs posed 'serious legal problem' for city in 1970

So how did Warwick end up with so many unenforceable "No Parking" signs in the first place?

An internal Police Department memo from June 23, 1970 provides some clues.

"To overcome a serious legal problem [....] I would recommend that the Board of Public Safety approve the posting of 'NO PARKING' signs on the following streets," Lt. John F. Coutcher of the Warwick Police Department's traffic division wrote in the memo, addressed to Commander Edward P. Audet.

What followed was a list of dozens of Warwick streets — all of them "either bordering the water, or close enough to make parking attractive," as Coutcher wrote.

Coutcher explained that the city's sign painter had already placed signs stating that parking was banned from May 15 to Sept. 15 on each of those streets.

"Some of these have been placed legally, and others just placed to satisfy complaints," he wrote.

In other words, city workers often slapped up "No Parking" signs after getting requests from residents — without bothering to get official approval.

Meeting minutes show that the Board of Public Safety responded to the 1970 memo by authorizing the placement of the signs that had already gone up, Mackisey said.

The city also formally banned parking on some of the streets listed in the memo — but not all of them. Up until the 1990s, the process for instituting parking restrictions appears to have been "pretty haphazard," Mackisey said.

For decades, requests for a "No Parking" sign went through the Department of Public Works. That changed in 1994, during Lincoln Chafee's tenure as mayor, when the city decided that any new restrictions would have to be justified by a traffic study and approved by the City Council in two separate votes.

City officials could no longer stick up "No Parking" signs without going through a formal public process. But that didn't change the fact that the Warwick already had a large number of signs that didn't correspond with a list of parking restrictions in the municipal code — and that some had likely been posted without the city's knowledge or involvement.

Confrontation with quahogger prompted city to reexamine parking signs

Warwick kicked off a systematic, citywide review of all parking signage this spring, a few months after Picozzi took office. Mackisey, who is helping lead the effort, said that the process began after the mayor's office got a call from a local quahogger.

According to Mackisey, the quahogger was trying to launch his boat from a public access point in Potowomut, but was told by a neighbor that he wasn't allowed to park there. Confusingly, no city ordinance prohibited parking near the boat launch, but a "No Parking" sign was visible on the street.

Staffers began looking into the inconsistency, and quickly realized that there was a "huge rash" of similar signs across the city, Mackisey said.

More: Public Street was blocked off to the public. Now it's becoming a coastal right-of-way.

To decide which signs actually serve a legitimate purpose, police have been measuring the width of each street to determine if there's adequate room for parking, and observing the volume of traffic. City staffers and council members have also been talking to residents to get input on which "No Parking" signs should stay.

The first neighborhood to go through the review process was Potowomut, followed by Oakland Beach. On Monday, the City Council issued final approval for a slew of new parking restrictions in both neighborhoods, which probably won't be noticed by many residents or visitors since the streets in question already have "No Parking" signs.

More likely to draw attention is the fact workers will begin taking down signs on streets where the city hasn't authorized any restrictions.

If neighbors try to take matters into their own hands by purchasing unauthorized "No Parking" signs and placing them on utility poles, "we'll go right ahead and take that down," Mackisey said.

It's less clear if the city can remove fraudulent street signs if they're placed on private property, but that hasn't been an issue so far, Mackisey said. There seem to be no legal penalties for anyone who puts up a fake sign on public property, but that "might be something we might want to take a look at."

Residents welcome 'clear process' for parking restrictions

Eventually, Picozzi's office hopes to make sure that every "No Parking" sign in the city matches up with an ordinance. It's a massive undertaking, so the city is prioritizing communities that have the biggest concerns about shoreline access and public safety.

Neighborhoods where parking restrictions are currently under review include Conimicut and the area around the John Brown Francis School, off Warwick Avenue.

One neighborhood that won't be undergoing a review is the Buttonwoods Beach Association. The city considers streets there to be private, though some would dispute that.

In some areas of Warwick, "No Parking" signs appear to have been erected to prevent patrons of local businesses from parking on the street. But the vast majority are found in waterfront communities, where they effectively deter visitors from getting close to the water.

In Potowomut, practically every street ends at a public of right-of-way, "but they're relatively inaccessible because there are 'No Parking' signs everywhere," Gebhart said.

Gebhart adds that he and other city officials aren't trying to promote the idea that people planning a beach day should head to Potowomut. The beaches in the residential neighborhood are small and have no amenities, especially when compared with Goddard Memorial State Park, which sits on the same peninsula.

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Many of the public right-of-ways are better suited to fishermen than beachgoers, since they're sandwiched between private docks on a coastline that's covered in rocks. Most can only be found with the help of a map and have no visual markers to distinguish them from neighbors' backyards, and at least one is blocked by shrubbery.

But perhaps because there's little chance of Potowomut being inundated by beachgoers, the city's plan to start taking down some "No Parking" signs has been uncontroversial.

At the August council meeting where the first vote on new ordinances took place, the only member of the public to express an opinion was a Potowomut resident who said that most neighbors welcome anyone who wants to "enjoy what little beaches we have."

Overall, the city has gotten pushback from only a small number of residents, Mackisey said. The overwhelming majority "are just happy we're following a clear process" to determine which signs should stay.

"In the past," Mackisey added, "there was this feeling that if you knew the right people, and called the right people, you could get a sign."